

DISCUSSION ARTICLE I:**St. Thomas's De Trinitate, Q. 5, A. 2 Ad 3: A Reply
To John Knasas***by Mark F. Johnson*

In his recent paper in the *Angelicum*, John Knasas provides us with his view as to when, and under which conditions, the wisdom of metaphysics may take its start.¹ He presents four representative positions on this topic, which he then investigates, thereafter adopting one of them as, in his view, the correct position. One of the positions which Knasas presents and investigates, but which he does not adopt, is the “natural philosophy approach”, an approach represented by the late James A. Weisheipl, O.P., who stated it in print some twelve years ago.²

The natural philosophy approach, it will be recalled, goes something like this. In order to complete a general science of nature, the natural philosopher must establish the cause of motion, since *ens mobile* is the subject of natural philosophy, and no thing is known fully if its cause is not known. In seeking the cause of motion the natural philosopher discovers that there is a first cause of motion which is wholly separate from matter: the unmoved mover. This new knowledge, the result of a demonstration *quia* through a non-convertible effect, tells us that not all being is

¹ John Knasas, “Immateriality and Metaphysics”, *Angelicum* 65 (1988), 44-76, to be cited hereafter as *Knasas*, followed by the appropriate page numbers.

² James A. Weisheipl, O.P., “The Relationship of Medieval Natural Philosophy to Modern Science: The Contribution of Thomas Aquinas to Its Understanding”, *Manuscripta* 20 (1976), pp. 181-196. This essay, together with ten other of Father Weisheipl's major essays on natural philosophy, has been republished by Catholic University Press in a volume entitled *Nature and Motion in the Middle Ages* (Washington, 1985). I shall cite this article in its republished form, retitled “Medieval Natural Philosophy and Modern Science”, which is chapter XI in this volume, pp. 261-276.

material, and thus tells us that there is a place for a science whose subject is being, not considered as mobile, but as such: *ens inquantum ens*. This science is called metaphysics.³

Knasas's response to the natural philosophy approach is quick and pointed, for he denies outright what would be the minor premise of the natural philosophy approach. Even if it is true that the science which discovers the immaterial sets the stage for metaphysics, natural philosophy is not that science, for it does not attain to the immaterial. As Knasas sees it, "Aquinas restricts philosophical knowledge of God and the angels together to metaphysics. Both are known only in metaphysics."⁴ The reason Knasas is convinced that St. Thomas restricts the immaterial to metaphysics is because he finds "no Thomistic texts that unequivocally give natural philosophy a demonstration of the immaterial."⁵ To support this claim, Knasas cites St. Thomas's *In Boethii de Trinitate*, question 5, article 2 and 3. While this text speaks of natural philosophy's prime mover, its *primus motor*, it does not speak of it as God, or, Knasas thinks, even as immaterial. It is "of a different nature from natural things," and is simply the end to which natural philosophy leads.⁶

All the same, and without wishing to enter into the broader discussion of the priority of physics to metaphysics, I find much more in this text than Knasas does. In fact, I think its real meaning is *opposed* to that given it by Knasas. The following, I hope, will make this clear.

³ Cf. Weisheipl, *op. cit.*, p. 274. See also Ralph McInerny *Being and Predication: Thomistic Interpretations* (Washington, 1986), ch. 3, "The Prime Mover and the Order of Learning", pp. 49-57; William H. Kane, O.P., *Approach to Philosophy: Elements of Thomism* (Washington, 1962), ch. 7, "The Subject of Metaphysics", pp. 161-179; Thomas C. O'Brien, O.P., *Metaphysics and the Existence of God* (Washington, 1960). It should be said that the present article is a sketch, and that the authors cited provide more detailed accounts in the works cited. In addition, there may be variations among those who take this view as to the different stages involved in such a process.

⁴ Knasas, p. 50. Knasas has very kindly given me a typescript of his article "*Ad Mentem Thomae: Does Natural Philosophy Prove God?*", soon to appear in *Divus Thomas*; this article reiterates the position he takes here.

⁵ Knasas, *ibidem*.

⁶ Knasas, *ibidem*.

The fifth and sixth questions of St. Thomas's *Expositio super librum Boethii de Trinitate* are treatments of the three speculative sciences, natural philosophy, mathematics and metaphysics.⁷ Both questions arise from the comments made by Boethius in the second chapter of his *De Trinitate*, where he speaks of the number, objects and methods of the speculative sciences. St. Thomas accordingly treats of the number and objects of the sciences in question 5, while relegating the treatment of their method to question 6.

The first of the three speculative sciences, Boethius points out, is natural philosophy, which considers what is *in motu, inabstracta*. In addition, that which the *naturalis* considers *habetque motum forma materiae coniuncta[e]*,⁸ In his *expositio textus* St. Thomas explains what we should understand Boethius to mean by this:

Quod autem dicit: *habetque motum forma materiae coniuncta*, sic intelligendum est: ipsum compositum ex materia et forma, in quantum huiusmodi, habet motum sibi debitum, vel ipsa forma in materia existens est principium motus; et ideo eadem est consideratio de rebus secundum quod sunt materiales et secundum quod sunt mobiles.⁹

Material things, composites of matter and form, are all subject to motion; whoever considers the one, must consider the other. The upshot of all this is that the subject of the natural philosopher, the *naturalis*, is *in motu, inabstracta*; he considers what is in matter and motion, not what is removed or abstracted (*inabstracta*). But

⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio super librum Boethii de Trinitate*, ed. B. Decker (Leiden, 1965), pp. 161-229. With the Leonine text still in the offing (which will be found in Vol. 50), this remains the best available edition, but note the *corrigenda et addenda* on pp. 244-245. All citations will be taken from this edition and cited according to the standard form. Page and line numbers will be given when necessary. Fr. A. Maurer, C.S.B. has translated these two questions into English as *The Divisions and Methods of the Sciences*, 4th revised edition, (Toronto, 1986).

⁸ Boethius, *De Trinitate*, chap. 2, as found in St. Thomas's *In Boethii de Trinitate*, p. 157, ll. 5, 8. I suggest the dropping of the "e" in *coniunctae* because both the Latin syntax and the context of Boethius's text seem to require it. Also, the lemma which St. Thomas gives before he himself comments upon this passage has "*habetque motum forma materiae coniuncta*". Cf. p. 159, l. 16.

⁹ *De Trin.*, *expositio secundi capituli*, p. 159, ll. 15-19. Because the discussion at hand concerns the precise meaning of certain texts, I have taken the liberty of quoting the Latin text throughout this article.

is this really true? Does the natural philosopher deal with what is in matter and motion? The second article of question 5 asks just this question, and it is in this context that we find the *ad tertium* which I see as containing a doctrine quite different from that suggested by Knasas.

There are seven objections to the question "*utrum naturalis philosophia sit de his quae sunt in motu et materia?*". Some of the objections look upon matter's characteristic of constant change as a source of the absolute unintelligibility of material things. One objection argues that since matter is the principle of individuation, and since no science deals with individuals, natural philosophy does not deal with matter. Furthermore, another argues, whatever is in motion is contingent, and if science is of what is necessary, then how can there be a science of what is in motion? Our own objection, the third, has a slightly different attack:

Praeterea, in scientia naturali agitur de primo motore, ut patet in viii *Physicorum*. Sed ipse est immunis ab omni materia. Ergo scientia naturalis non est de his solis quae sunt in materia.¹⁰

This argument presents a serious difficulty for one who would maintain that natural philosophy does concern itself with what is in matter and in motion. An integral approach to Aristotle's work the *Physics* would indicate that the natural philosopher deals with the prime mover, which, the objector claims, is totally removed from matter: *immunis ab omni materia*. The claim that natural philosophy deals with what is in matter and in motion is false then, if it is intended to mean that natural philosophy deals *only* with beings of this kind.

As usual, St. Thomas dedicates his *responsio* to solving the basic difficulty that this question poses, which he does by detailing the character of abstraction of the universal from the particular, which in turn allows for knowledge of a nature whose existence *in rerum natura* is always accompanied by the individuating conditions of matter. St. Thomas thereafter responds to the various objections, and responds to our third objection in its course. It would seem that the simplest response St. Thomas could make to this objection would be that natural philosophy does not attain to a prime mover which is immaterial at all: *nego minorem*. Indeed, if St. Thomas's

¹⁰ St. Thomas, *In de Trin.*, q. 5, a. 2 obj. 3, p. 174, ll. 7-9.

goal were to defend the claim that natural philosophy deals only with things that are material and in motion, he would seem bound to deny the claim of the objector. In short, if St. Thomas truly thinks that the natural philosopher does *not* attain to a knowledge of an immaterial reality, then he has before him the perfect opportunity for making his teaching on this matter clear. And yet, St. Thomas does not do this. In fact, in no part of his reply does St. Thomas come close to contradicting the objection's claim that the *naturalis* considers the immaterial.

Ad tertium dicendum quod de primo motore non agitur in scientia naturali tamquam de subiecto vel de parte subiecti, sed tamquam de termino ad quem scientia naturalis perducit. Terminus autem non est de natura rei, cuius est terminus, sed habet aliquam habitudinem ad rem illam, sicut terminus lineae non est linea, sed habet ad eam aliquam habitudinem, ita etiam et primus motor est alterius naturae a rebus naturalibus, habet tamen ad eas aliquam habitudinem, in quantum influit eis motum, et sic cadit in consideratione naturalis, scilicet non secundum ipsum, sed in quantum est motor.¹¹

We should first of all point out what St. Thomas does not say. He does not say that the *naturalis* does not consider a prime mover, nor does he say that the prime mover is not immaterial. Furthermore, St. Thomas does not see the objection as a hypothetical proposal to which he feels bound to offer a hypothetical reply. His response is not one of *dato, non concesso*; the conditional conjunction *si* is found nowhere in the *ad tertium*, nor is any verb in the subjunctive mood. St. Thomas simply does not contradict the objection.

What the text rather seems to indicate is that St. Thomas grants outright the claim of the objection and then sets out to explain how he can both grant the objector's claim and maintain at the same time an affirmative answer to the initial question of the article. *Dato et concesso* that the prime mover which the natural philosopher considers is free from all matter (*immunis ab omni materia*), how can this be reconciled with the claim that natural philosophy considers what is in matter and motion? Since St. Thomas himself points out that the prime mover is "of another nature from natural things" (*primus motor est alterius naturae*

¹¹ St. Thomas, *In de Trin.*, q. 5, a. 2 ad 3, pp. 177-178, 11. 26-36.

a rebus naturalibus), the prime mover cannot be the subject or part of the subject of natural philosophy; *de primo motore non agitur in scientia naturali tamquam de subiecto vel de parte subiecti* . . . If natural philosophy is to deal with this immaterial prime mover at all, then, it will do so only in virtue of its subject's having a *per se* relationship to this prime mover. This is, of course, the very way in which St. Thomas proceeds.

The prime mover, while immaterial, is the starting-point of the motion of material things. St. Thomas's illustration of the point of a line, while not mentioned by Knasas, is very useful here, for the infinite regress argument in the *Physics* has a very linear character; just as moved movers lead to an unmoved mover as to that from which they proceed as movers, so too does a finite line lead to a point as to that from which it proceeds. In both cases the *terminus* is of a different nature from that which proceeds from it; the prime mover is altogether immobile, even *per accidens*,¹² and is immaterial,¹³ and the point is position without extension, and the line is length (extension) without width.¹⁴ Both *termini*, however much "of another nature" they may be as to their respective *terminati*, are nonetheless necessary to an investigation which proposes to treat of these things which are, in fact, *terminati*; moved movers are not fully understood without knowledge of an unmoved mover, and finite lines are not understood without their two points, the principles of their finitude. It is precisely because of this that St. Thomas thinks he can both grant the immateriality of natural philosophy's prime mover and maintain that natural philosophy deals with that which is *in motu, inabstracta*; the prime mover, although immaterial, and although the occasion for further and perhaps much more fulfilling discussion, is nonetheless the first cause of the motion which is the prime consideration of the natural philosopher, for by the influx of motion into natural things it establishes a relationship, a *habitus*, between itself and things whose natures are so markedly different from its own: *et sic cadit in consideratione naturalis, scilicet non secundum ipsum, sed in quantum est motor*.

¹² Cf. St. Thomas, *In VIII Physicorum*, ed. Maggìolo (Taurini, 1965), lect. 12, nos. 1073-1074.

¹³ Cf. *ibidem*, lect. 23.

¹⁴ Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, 85, 8 ad 2.

To sum up. The intelligibility of St. Thomas's *ad tertium* in question 5, article 2, of his *Expositio super Boethii de Trinitate* depends upon our seeing that he both grants outright the claim of the third objection that the prime mover which the natural philosopher considers is, in fact, immaterial, and that he devotes the entire *ad tertium* to explaining not *whether* the natural philosopher deals with the immaterial, but *how it happens* that in dealing with the immaterial he remains a natural philosopher. Since the existence of the immaterial could hardly be a starting operative principle for the natural philosopher, and since the objection's reference is to the eighth book of the *Physics*, where Aristotle is proceeding by way of demonstration, it seems a fair inference that St. Thomas would say that the natural philosopher's ability to speak of an immaterial prime mover would be the result of a demonstration had properly within the boundaries of his science, and thus for St. Thomas, at least in this early work (written between 1252-1259),¹⁵ natural philosophy does demonstrate the existence of the immaterial. And assuming that St. Thomas continues to hold that the eighth book of the *Physics* is natural philosophy, and there is no reason to doubt this,¹⁶ it would seem that he maintains that natural philosophy demonstrates the immaterial late in his life as well.¹⁷

¹⁵ The dating is that of Father Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas d'Aquino: His Life, Thought and Work* (Washington, 1983), pp. 381-382, 438.

¹⁶ St. Thomas concludes his commentary on the *Physics* with the following: "Et sic terminat Philosophus *considerationem communem de rebus naturalibus* in primo principio totius naturae, qui est super omnia Deus benedictus in saecula. Amen." *In VIII Physicorum*, lect. 23, no. 1172 (my italics).

¹⁷ "Probatum est in octavo *Physicorum*, quod cum non sit abire in infinitum in moventibus et motis, oportet devenire in aliquod primum movens immobile: quia et si deveniatur in aliquod movens seipsum, iterum ex hoc oportet devenire in aliquod movens immobile, ut ibi probatum est" *In XII Metaphysicorum*, ed. Spiazzi (Taurini, 1964), lect. 6, no. 2517; "Antiqui enim non opinabantur aliquam substantiam esse praeter substantiam corpoream mobilem, de qua physicus tractat . . . Non enim omne ens est huiusmodi: cum probatum sit in octavo *Physicorum* esse aliquod ens immobile" *In IV Meta.*, lect. 5, no. 593; See also *ibid.*, lect. 13, no. 690; lect. 17, no. 748. Fr. Weisheipl dates the commentary on the *Physics* as 1270-1271, and the commentary on the *Metaphysics* as 1269-1272. See his *Friar Thomas*, pp. 375-376, 379, 482.

The minor premise of the “natural philosophy approach” remains standing, and Thomists who value this approach can, I think, look with confidence to the *ad tertium* of St. Thomas’s commentary on the *De Trinitate* for support. The major premise, however, namely that the science which discovers the immaterial sets the stage for metaphysics, poses other questions.

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